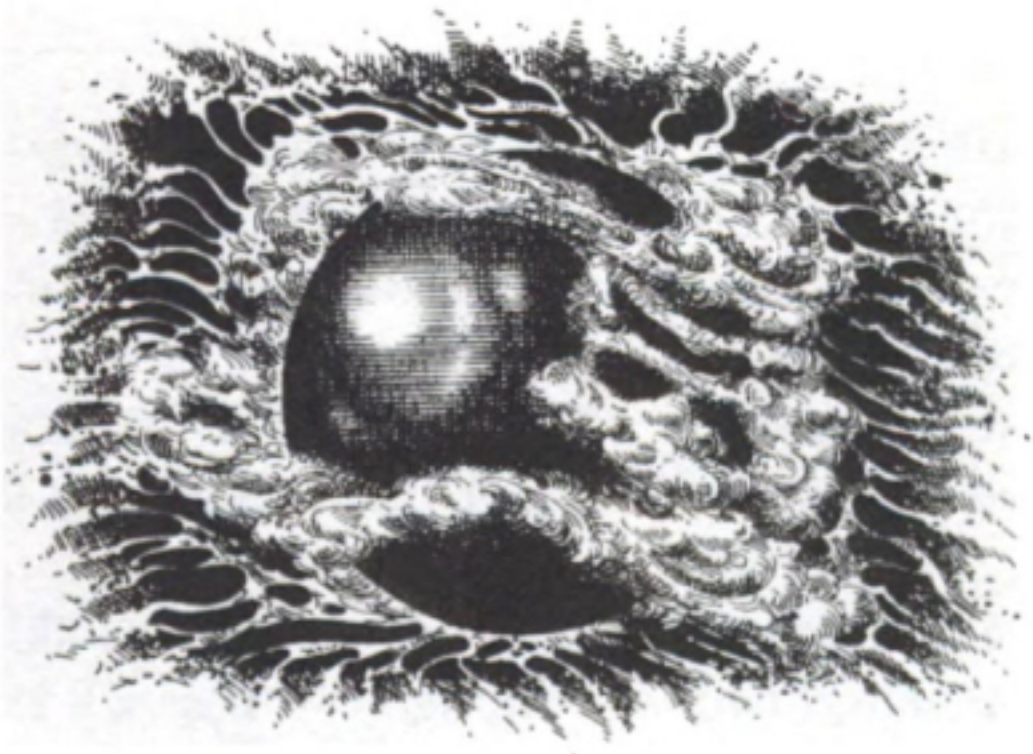

Soon upon a time, and not so far ahead, there was a long streak of light down the night sky, a flicker of fire, and a terrible bang that startled all who heard it, even those who were normally inured to noise. When day came, the matter was discussed, argued, and finally dismissed. For no one could discover any cause at all for the disturbance.

Shortly afterwards, at a farm, there was heard a scrabbling at the door, and a crying. When the people went to see what was there, they found a creature. It was not easy to tell what sort of creature, but far too easy to tell that it was hurt and hungry and afraid. Only its pain and hunger had brought it to the door for help.

Being used to beasts, the farmer and his wife tended the thing. They put it in a loose-box and tended it. They brought water in a big basin and it drank thirstily, but with some difficulty—for it seemed to want to lift it to its mouth instead of lapping, and the basin was too big, and it was too weak. So it lapped. The farmer dressed the great



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burn that seared its thigh and shoulder and arm. He was kind enough, in a rough way, but the creature moaned, and set its teeth, and muttered strange sounds, and clenched its front paws . . .

Those front paws . . . ! They were so like human hands that it was quite startling to see them. Even with their soft covering of grey fur they were slender, long-fingered, with the fine nails of a girl. And its body was like that of a boy—a half-grown lad—though it was as tall as a man. Its head was man-shaped. The long and slanting eyes were as yellow as topaz, and shone from inside with their own light. And the lashes were thick and silvery.

'It's a monkey of some kind,' decided the farmer.

'But so beautiful,' said his wife. 'I've never heard of a monkey like this. They're charming—pretty—amusing—all in their own way. But not beautiful, as a real person might be.'

They were concerned when the creature refused to eat. It turned away its furry face, with those wonderful eyes, the straight nose, and curving fine lips, and would not touch the best of the season's hay. It would not touch the dog biscuits or the bones. Even the boiled cod-head that was meant for the cats' supper, it refused. In the end, it settled for milk. It lapped it delicately out of the big basin, making small movements of its hands—its forepaws—as though it would have preferred some smaller utensil that it could lift to its mouth.

Word went round. People came to look at the strange and injured creature in the barn. Many people came. From the village, the town, and the city. They prodded it, and examined it, turning it this way and that. But no one could decide just what it was. A beast for sure. A monkey, most likely. Escaped from a circus or menagerie. Yet



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whoever had lost it made no attempt to retrieve it, made no offer of reward for its return.

Its injuries healed. The soft fur grew again over the bare grey skin. Experts from the city came and took it away for more detailed examination. The wife of the farmer was sad to see it go. She had grown quite attached to it.

'It was getting to know me,' said she. 'And it talked to me—in its fashion.'

The farmer nodded slowly and thoughtfully.

'It was odd,' he said, 'the way it would imitate what one said. You know, like a parrot does. Not real talking, of course, just imitation.'

'Of course,' said his wife. 'I never thought it was real talk. I'm not so silly.'

It was good at imitating speech, the creature. Very soon, it had learned many words and phrases, and began to string them together quite quickly, and with surprising sense. One might have thought it knew what it meant—if one was silly.

The professors and elders and priests who now took the creature in hand were far from silly. They were puzzled, and amused, and interested—at first. They looked at it, in the disused monkey-cage at the city's menagerie, where it was kept. And it stood upright, on finely-furred feet as arched and perfect as the feet of an ancient statue.

'It is oddly human,' said the learned men.

They amused themselves by bringing it a chair and watching it sit down gracefully, though not very comfortably, as if it was used to furniture of better shape and construction. They gave it a plate and a cup, and it ate with its hands most daintily, looking round as though for



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some sort of cutlery. But it was not thought safe to trust it with a knife.

'It is only a beast,' said everyone. 'However clever at imitation.'

'It's so quick to learn,' said some.

'But not in any way human.'

'No,' said the creature, 'I am not human. But, in my own place, I am a man.'

'Parrot-talk!' laughed the elders, uneasily.

The professors of living and dead languages taught it simple speech.

After a week, it said to them:

'I understand all the words you use. They are very easy. And you cannot quite express what you mean, in any of your tongues. A child of my race—' It stopped, for it had no wish to seem impolite, and then it said, 'There is a language that is spoken throughout the universe. If you will allow me—'

And softly and musically it began to utter a babble of meaningless nonsense at which all the professors laughed loudly.

'Parrot-talk!' they jeered. 'Pretty Polly! Pretty Polly!'

For they were much annoyed. And they mocked the creature into cowering silence.

The professors of logic came to the same conclusions as the others.

'Your logic is at fault,' the creature had told them, despairingly. 'I have disproved your conclusions again and again. You will not listen or try to understand.'

'Who could understand parrot-talk?'

'I am no parrot, but a man in my own place. Define a man. I walk upright. I think. I collate facts. I imagine. I anticipate. I learn. I speak. What is a man by your definition?'



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'Pretty Polly!' said the professors.

They were very angry. One of them hit the creature with his walking-cane. No one likes to be set on a level with a beast. And the beast covered its face with its hands, and was silent.

It was warier when the mathematicians came. It added two and two together for them. They were amazed. It subtracted eight from ten. They wondered at it. It divided twenty by five. They marvelled. It took courage. It said:

'But you have reached a point where your formulae and calculuses fail. There is a simple law—one by which you reached the earth long ago—one by which you can leave it at will—'

The professors were furious.

'Parrot! Parrot!' they shouted.

'No! In my own place—'

The beast fell silent.

Then came the priests, smiling kindly—except to one another. For with each other they argued furiously and loathingly regarding their own views on rule and theory.

'Oh, stop!' said the creature, pleadingly.

It lifted its hands towards them and its golden eyes were full of pity.

'You make everything petty and meaningless,' it said. 'Let me tell you of the Master-Plan of the Universe. It is so simple and nothing to do with gods or rules, myths or superstition. Nothing to do with fear.'

The priests were so outraged that they forgot to hate one another. They screamed wildly with one voice:

'Wicked!'

They fled from the creature, jamming in the cage door in their haste to escape and forget the soul-less, evil thing. And the beast sighed and hid its sorrowful face, and took



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refuge in increasing silence.

The elders grew to hate it. They disliked the imitating and the parrot-talk, the golden eyes, the sorrow, the pity. They took away its chair, its table, its plate and cup. They ordered it to walk properly—on all fours, like any other beast.

'But in my own place—'

It broke off there. Yet some sort of pride, or stubbornness, or courage, made it refuse to crawl, no matter what they threatened or did.

They sold it to a circus.

A small sum was sent to the farmer who had first found the thing, and the rest of its price went into the state coffers for making weapons for a pending war.

The man who owned the circus was not especially brutal, as such men go. He was used to training beasts, for he was himself the chief attraction of the show, with his lions and tigers, half-drugged and toothless as they were. He said it was no use being too easy on animals.

'They don't understand over-kindness,' said he. 'They get to despising you. You have to show who's master.'

He showed the creature who was master.

He made it jump through hoops and do simple sums on a blackboard. At first it also tried to speak to the people who came to look at it. It would say, in its soft and bell-clear tones:

'Oh, listen—I can tell you things—'

Everyone was amazed at its cleverness and most entertained by the eager way it spoke. And such parrot-nonsense it talked!

'Hark at it!' they cried. 'It wants to tell us things, bless it!'

'About the other side of the moon!'



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'The far side of Saturn!'

'Who taught it to say all this stuff?'

'It's saying something about the block in mathematics now!'

'And the language of infinity!'

'Logic!'

'And the Master-Plan!'

They rolled about, helpless with laughter in their ringside seats.

It was even more entertaining to watch the creature doing its sums on the big blackboard, which two attendants would turn so that everyone could admire the cleverness: 2 and 2, and the beautifully-formed 4 that it wrote beneath. 10 – 8 = 2. Five into 20. 11 from 12.

'How clever it is,' said a small girl, admiringly.

Her father smiled.

'It's the trainer who's clever,' he said. 'The animal knows nothing of what it does. Only what it has been taught. By kindness, of course,' he added quickly, as the child looked sad.

'Oh, good,' said she, brightening. 'I wouldn't like it hurt. It's so sweet.'

But even she had to laugh when it came to the hoop-jumping. For the creature hated doing it. And, although the long whip of the trainer never actually touched its grey fur, yet it cowered at the cracking sound. Surprising, if anyone had wondered why. And it ran, upright on its fine furred feet, and graceful in spite of the red and yellow clothes it was wearing, and it jumped through the hoops. And then more hoops were brought. And these were surrounded by inflammable material and set on fire.

The audience was enthralled. For the beast was terrified of fire, for some reason. It would shrink back and



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clutch at its shoulder, its arm, its thigh. It would stare up wildly into the roof of the great circus canopy—as if it could see through it and out to the sky beyond—as though it sought desperately for help that would not come. And it shook and trembled. And the whip cracked. And it cried aloud as it came to each flaming hoop. But it jumped.

And it stopped talking to the people. Sometimes it would almost speak, but then it would give a hunted glance towards the ring-master, and lapse into silence. Yet always it walked and ran and jumped as a man would do these things—upright. Not on all fours, like a proper beast.

And soon a particularly dangerous tightrope dance took the fancy of the people. The beast was sold to a small touring animal-show. It was getting very poor in entertainment value, anyway. It moved sluggishly. Its fur was draggled and dull. It had even stopped screaming at the fiery hoops. And—it was such an eerie, man-like thing to have around. Everyone was glad to see it go.

In the dreary little show where it went, no one even pretended to understand animals. They just showed them in their cages. Their small, fetid cages. To begin with, the keeper would bring the strange creature out to perform for the onlookers. But it was a boring performance. Whip or no whip, hunger or less hunger, the beast could no longer run or jump properly. It shambled round and round, dull-eyed and silent. People merely wondered what sort of animal it was, but not with any great interest. It could hardly even be made to flinch at fire, not even when sparks touched its fur. It was sold to a collector of rare beasts. And he took it to his little menagerie on the edge of his estate near a forest.



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He was not really very interested in his creatures. It was a passing hobby for a very rich man. Something to talk about among his friends. Only once he came to inspect his new acquisition. He prodded it with a stick. He thought it rather an ugly, dreary animal.

'I heard that you used to talk, parrot-fashion,' said he. 'Go on, then, say something.'

It only cowered. He prodded it some more.

'I read about you when they had you in the city,' said the man, prodding harder. 'You used to talk, I know you did. So talk now. You used to say all sorts of clever things. That you were a man in your own place. Go on, tell me you're a man.'

'Pretty Polly,' mumbled the creature, almost inaudibly.

Nothing would make it speak again.

It was so boring that no one took much notice or care of it. And one night it escaped from its cage.

The last glimpse that anyone saw of it was by a hunter in the deeps of the forest.

It was going slowly looking in terror at rabbits and squirrels. It was weeping aloud and trying desperately to walk on all fours.



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